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The Poltergeist and Cultural Values:
A Comparative Interpretation of a Brazilian and an American Case*

Abstract

The interpretations of both the members of the afflicted families and of the parapsychology researchers are compared for two poltergeist cases: Powatan case of the United States and the Gaurulhos case of Brazil. The "recurrent spontaneous psychokinesis" interpretation of the American case expresses Anglo-Saxon values such as individualism, whereas the sorcery interpretation of the Brazilian case expresses Latino values such as personalism. An alternative approach which might supercede these value-laden theories is suggested.

* I wish to thank Patric Giesler for his comments on an earlier draft of this paper, especially regarding the possibility that the "poltergeist itself" might vary across cultures and that the two theories considered here might represent "culture-bound theories."

Most parapsychologists who belong to the Parapsychological Association interpret poltergeists as the "recurrent spontaneous psychokinesis" (RSPK) of an "agent," a person around whom the phenomena focus. This paper examines some of the cultural values and implicit assumptions behind this interpretation by comparing a typical poltergeist case in the United States with one in Brazil. This comparison will lead to a series of questions regarding the values that inform the current approaches to the study of poltergeists. I begin by reviewing two poltergeist studies in two cultures; the first is based on the work of Hernani Guimarães Andrade on the poltergeist of Guarulhos, a city in the state of São Paulo, Brazil, and the second is based on the research of John Palmer on the poltergeist of Powhatan, a town in the southern United States.

The Case Studies

The family involved in the Guarulhos case spent most of their time in this city, which is located outside of São Paulo. In the beginning, an extended family lived together in two connected houses. This included the presumed poltergeist "agent," whose name was Noêmia. Noêmia was recently married and pregnant, and she lived with her husband, a one-and-a-half-year-old daughter, her husband's father and mother, and their family of three daughters and two sons. The family all belonged to the Pentecostalist faith, a religion that is growing rapidly in Brazil by attracting large numbers of converts among the working class.

Andrade divides the case into three major phases (for an English-language review, see Alvarado, 1985). During the first phase, from April 27, 1973, to May 1, 1973, the family experienced cuts on the furniture, some disappearances of money, and apparitions of a monstrous, animal-like figure. The poltergeist ended after prayers and Bible readings (Andrade, 1984: 8). During the second phase, from the end of April, 1974, to October 25, 1974, the family experienced rock showers, bodily cuts (first on the husband, then on Noêmia's daughter, then on Noêmia), tears in their clothing, broken objects, mysterious appearances of rosemary branches, disappearances of money, and fires. During this period Noêmia's family moved to her parents' home, but the poltergeist followed them. In August of 1974, the family moved to a new home in Guarulhos and held an evangelical session in their home, which was successful (p. 23).

A third phase began on March 28, 1975; no date of termination is given. During this phase the family experienced missing money, moving and breaking objects, and falling stones, but no more cuts (p. 29). In addition, one of the children and a girl who did chores also showed signs of spirit possession, and Noêmia reports having lost a tooth while she was sleeping. The religious leaders of the family's church held a ceremony in which they anointed the corners of the house with a special oil, and this brought relief to the family.

The family expressed two broad interpretations. Noêmia's father-in-law believed that her husband had caused the problems because "he began to fall away from the principles [of the Gospel]

and we knew that something would happen" (p. 53). The father-in-law believed that there were three monsters involved, one of which he defeated in a physical struggle. According to the Noêmia's husband, the poltergeist diminished after Noêmia saw the figure of a deformed Satan and became more religious (p. 67). Together these comments indicate that one interpretation was that the phenomena represented divine retribution for lack of religious faith.

The second interpretation, which Andrade supported, was that the phenomena were due to sorcery. A mysterious pair of women attempted to enter the house on more than one occasion, and Noêmia notes that she saw that the women were carrying a clear plastic bag with candles and rosemary in them, which in Brazil are often materials for black magic rituals (p. 47). In addition, sensitives of the family's religion made a psychometric reading of a piece of clothing and said that someone had performed a work of black magic against them. Noêmia's husband believed that the person responsible might have been an old lover (p. 72). Furthermore, Andrade notes that the monster which some members of the family saw corresponds to the Umulum spirit of the Umbanda/Quimbanda religion (p. 63), and he argues that sorcery was the best explanation for the poltergeist of Guarulhos. He rejects the RSPK interpretation and argues that there were no signs of sexual repression or family conflicts (p. 70).

A different type of poltergeist is found in Palmer's report (1974) on the Powhatan poltergeist in the rural South of the United States. The presumed agent of this case was a ten-and-a-half-year-old boy, J. E., who lived with his elderly foster parents. According to J.E., the poltergeist attack began on December 2, 1971, and Palmer investigated the case on January 6, 7, and 10, when the case was still active. The report does not give a precise date of termination, although it appears to have ended prior to J.E.'s foster mother's death in April, 1972. The witnesses--which included J.E.'s great aunt, maternal grandmother, and local doctor--experienced stomping noises and object movements.

Like the Guarulhos case, the interpretations of the people involved were split. J.E.'s foster father believed that the phenomena represented "a revelation of God," and later he interpreted them as portents from God warning about the impending deaths of his wife and J.E.'s great aunt (pp. 19, 32). Prior to her death, J.E.'s foster mother said that J.E. "had the devil in him" (p. 20). The only other interpretations that Palmer discusses are those of J.E.'s great aunt and the family doctor, whose naturalistic point-of-view contrasts sharply with the religious meaning that the events had for the foster parents. The great aunt told Palmer that the events "fascinated" her more than they "scared" her, and the doctor appeared to believe that the boy had psychokinetic abilities (pp. 20-21). Palmer does not discuss the meaning of the poltergeist to the other witnesses; his own interpretation focuses on personality and psychodynamic factors that might have patterned what he interprets as ostensible RSPK centered on J.E. Palmer notes that J.E. was a severe behavior problem in school and that it was likely that he denied feelings of aggression because at one level he felt thankful that his foster parents had taken him in.

Comparing Interpretations

The two cases bring out three major types of interpretations of the poltergeist. In the Brazilian case, the percipients oscillate between the religious and sorcery interpretations, and in the American case, some percipients find a religious meaning more suitable, whereas others find a more naturalistic, RSPK-type interpretation more appropriate. In the Brazilian case, the researcher sides with the sorcery interpretation, and in the American case, he sides with the RSPK interpretation.

The religious interpretation of the poltergeist (either as a portent of God's will or as a demoniacal infestation) cuts across the two cases and is a product of their shared Western, Christian cultural background. The significant division in the two cases is the difference between the sorcery and the RSPK interpretations. Few, if any, poltergeist studies in Anglo-Saxon cultural contexts by Anglo-Saxon researchers deviate from the RSPK interpretation, and the sorcery interpretation is rare if nonexistent (for a possible exception, see McHarg, 1973). Even in those Anglo-Saxon poltergeist cases that have similar phenomena to that of the Guarulhos case--such as the Berini case (Roll and Tringale 1983), which involved apparitions and attacks on the focus person--the interpretation of the researchers followed the RSPK framework.

In contrast, during my dissertation research in Brazil, I met with Andrade and talked with him several times, and when we discussed his research on poltergeists, he pointed out that of the poltergeist cases for which he has collected some information, the vast majority involve sorcery (also see Playfair, 1975: 274). However, not all poltergeists in Brazil are linked to sorcery. In a report on jumping "otá" stones in the Candomblé ceremony, Giesler (1982) argues that the poltergeist effect is ritual-centered; several of the cases reported by Playfair do not involve sorcery; and Jesuit parapsychologists such as Edvino Friderichs do not endorse the sorcery interpretation (1977). Nevertheless, in at least two of the eight cases reported by Playfair (1975), who worked closely with Andrade, the victims attributed the poltergeist attack to sorcery. The sorcery interpretation is therefore relatively absent in the American and Western European context, whereas it is relatively commonplace in Brazil.

The two contradictory interpretations of the poltergeist--RSPK and sorcery--are therefore linked to two different cultural contexts--the United States and Brazil. The analysis that follows will articulate this division of interpretations with previous sociological and anthropological studies on the cultural differences between Brazil and the United States.

To begin understanding the Brazilian sorcery interpretation, it helps to know that Andrade is a Spiritist (a follower of Allan Kardec's doctrine) and that many Spiritists in Brazil believe that the majority of the people who come to their Spiritist centers for disorientation treatment (a kind of exorcism) are victims of the sorcery of the Afro-Brazilian religions. As I have discussed in my dissertation (1987), the largely white, middle-class Spiritist movement tends to lump together under the rubric of black magic all of the varied Afro-Brazilian religions. Thus Andrade's

interpretation of the poltergeists as sorcery is linked to the broader Spiritist belief that many victims of spirit obsession are victims of sorcery.

Belief in spirits is ubiquitous in Brazil, as it is in many Latin American, African, and Asian cultural contexts. Thus even if Andrade had guided the afflicted family's interpretation toward sorcery, he would have encountered resistance if this belief were not already widespread in Brazilian culture. Andrade had no trouble eliciting a sorcery interpretation from the victims, and this interpretation probably occurred to them prior to his investigation. In short, the sorcery interpretation is an expression of the Brazilian cultural context.

There is also some evidence that the sorcery interpretation of poltergeists exists in other cultures of the African diaspora. For example, J. J. Williams (1934: 251-252) suggests that poltergeist and duddie cases in Jamaica may be related to obeah sorcery, and sorcery was one of the interpretations that appeared in the Jamaican poltergeist case discussed by anthropologist William Wendenhoja (1978). Likewise, three of the cases reported by I. D. Du Plessis (1966) for South Africa involve a belief in sorcery, and many anthropological studies have demonstrated the importance of witchcraft and sorcery in African cultures. The sorcery interpretation of poltergeists may even extend beyond the African diaspora; for example, an Indian newspaper that reported on the Pillay case suggested that "someone had through a magician induced the devil to do havoc in the house of Mr. Thangapragasams Pillay" (Thurston, 1953: 78).

The problem with most reports of poltergeists in non-Western cultures is that they generally involve European or Europeanized witnesses and investigators; this, combined with the researcher's emphasis on the "evidentiality" question, means that there is very little opportunity for the articulation of non-Western cultural interpretations. As a result, there is a dearth of data on this possible cultural pattern, and one can at this point only hypothesize that although all interpretations probably exist to some extent in all cultures, in some non-Western cultural contexts the sorcery interpretation tends predominate.

Existing research in comparative sociology/social anthropology on the contrast in values between modern and traditional cultures helps clarify the question of why a sorcery interpretation might be more prevalent in non-Western or traditional cultural contexts. Anthropologist Roberto DaMatta argues that in the United States and much of Western Europe, formal political and economic institutions play the dominant role in society, whereas in Brazil and other societies with a strong traditional component, kinship and informal personal relationships rival and at times predominate over formal institutions (DaMatta, 1978, 1985, 1986; for an English-language source, cf. DaMatta, 1982). Wagley's survey (1968: 175-195) of Brazilian kinship studies reveals that Brazilians have extensive godparent/godchildren relationships and large parentelas (webs of kin relations), which in the middle and upper classes of the cities sometimes involve several hundred relatives. These informal institutions generally involve hierarchical relationships

(older/younger, male/female, godparent/godchild; see Hutchinson 1966), and their personalistic, hierarchical ethic encompasses both formal institutions and their accompanying egalitarian and universalistic ethics.

DaMatta discusses this difference in ethics as a difference between the peessoa (literally "person," but meaning something more like "insider") and the indivíduo (literally "individual," but more like "outsider"). In Brazil, social relations are constructed in a framework of diffuse roles, particularistic values, and hierarchical relationships, whereas in the United States and many countries of Western Europe the framework involves role specificity, universalistic values, and egalitarian relationships (Parsons and Shils, 1951). DaMatta characterizes Brazil as a "relational society," in contrast with the United States, where formal institutions based on the value of the abstract "individual" encompass informal, personalistic relationships (see Dumont, 1980, on the individual).

This background of social anthropology/comparative sociology helps clarify the cultural presuppositions at work in the two opposing theories of the poltergeist. Andrade argues that the necessary and sufficient factors for a poltergeist outbreak are the following: "1) a sorcerer, 2) the discarnate agents that obey the sorcerer and act as intermediaries, 3) the empirical magical practices that act on the discarnate agents and lead them to molest the victim, and 4) the presence, at the location of the phenomena, of a human epicenter that is capable of furnishing the energy or substance necessary for the discarnate agents sent by the sorcerer; in the absence of the epicenter, discarnate agents appear to be capable of using the accumulated energy that the epicenter furnishes" (1984: 73). In an academic language, Andrade clearly formulates Brazilian cultural concepts regarding the elements of sorcery. Note that, in DaMatta's terms, it is a relational theory of the poltergeist: the poltergeist is encompassed by a set of personal relationships between a sorcerer, a spirit, a human agent, and, implicitly, a victimizer or someone who initiates the sorcery.

The sorcery interpretation therefore transforms the poltergeist into a series of hierarchical, personal relations: the victimizer goes to the sorcerer, who acts as patron and in turn binds the evil spirits and sends them to perturb the victim. The victim, in turn, calls on religious authorities--in this case the Protestant pastor and Noêmia's father-in-law--who serve as counterbalancing patrons in this spiritual feud. In other cases, the victim may go to a Spiritist disobsession ("exorcism") meeting, where Spiritist mediums call on their own patrons, the spirits of light, for help in turning back the evil spirits (on the medium as patron, see Greenfield, 1986). The structure therefore involves three pairs of relations: victim/victimizer, sorcerer/pastor (or Catholic exorcist, Spiritist medium, etc.), and evil spirit/God (or Catholic saint, Spiritist spirit of light, etc.). The sorcery interpretation confirms the importance of this network of conflicting, hierarchical, personal relationships in the face of alternative explanations--demoniacal intervention, RSPK--that represent universalistic values and formal institutions.

Andrade believes that if the "astral double" of discarnate spirits "has a sufficient dose of ectoplasm, it can manage to to manifest itself tangibly" and to assume animal or monstrous forms (1984: 63). When the theory of materialized beings and ectoplasm replaces that of a psychokinetic force (the RSPK interpretation), the the poltergeist is transformed from an independent "individual" to a peessoa that can only exist in a personal relationship of hierarchy with the victim: the poltergeist is a spirit that depends on the living agent. The difference between ectoplasm and psychokinesis therefore corresponds to that between the Brazilian peessoa and the Anglo-Saxon individual.

In contrast, the phrase "recurrent spontaneous psychokinesis" replaces the network of personal relations with one actor, the agent, who is a prototype of the Western individual. The RSPK interpretation focuses on how the social context (a family situation) affects the psychology of the individual; it translates the social into the psychological. The essential conflict then becomes not one of two feuding hierarchies but of an individual (the agent) versus the community (the family). The American poltergeist case therefore dramatizes the classic dilemma of American culture--the relationship between individual and community--just as the Brazilian case dramatizes the Brazilian dilemma of conflicts between those linked to a hierarchy (peessoas) and those outside of it (indivíduos). In the American case, the community or family creates a social context in which the individual is forced to repress or deny feelings of sexuality or hostility. The poltergeist outbreak confirms the value of the individual; the community or family can only repress the individual so far until it rebels and (through RSPK) reasserts its importance.

As I have discussed in another paper (Hess, 1988), the term "spontaneous" may be linked to implicit ideas that situate the psychic in a network of gender-laden images that mark it as female. In this context, we see how an image of the female--the psychic as something "spontaneous" and not reducible to the law-like patterns of society--links up with the Anglo-Saxon ideology of the "individual," an entity that is also to some extent "spontaneous" and not reducible to the oppressive demands or laws of the society in which it is placed. In the RSPK interpretation, the raw emotions of aggression or sexuality dramatize the moral principle of individualism; they represent the individual in an act of rebellion against the oppressive rules of an authoritarian family or community situation.

The RSPK interpretation is also similar to the religious interpretation of the poltergeist, in which the family is victimized because it has violated some kind of universalistic moral principle or because a demon has happened to choose the family as its victim. In this case, the poltergeist drama represents an explicit conflict between universalistic values of good and evil, just as the RSPK interpretation represents the conflict between the rights of the individual and the oppressive demands of society. In contrast, the sorcery interpretation encompasses the religious drama of good and evil with the personal relationships of envy, hatred, and passion:

revenge replaces universalistic principles of divine retribution or social justice.

Concluding Comments

Cultural comparison has the advantage of relativizing what appears to be a "universal" and "scientific" interpretation of the poltergeist: the RSPK theory. By showing that in other cultures the sorcery interpretation appears to make more sense to both the afflicted and the researchers, the RSPK interpretation appears in contrast to express modern cultural values such as individualism and the conflict between the individual and the community.

This comparative study may raise a series of questions for the parapsychologist. Which theory is right? Is the RSPK interpretation the universally valid theory and the sorcery interpretation the traditional, "popular" theory? Or does the "poltergeist itself" vary across cultures, and therefore might each interpretation be correct in its own cultural context? In other words, do the sorcery and RSPK interpretations represent culture-bound theories?

These are questions with which parapsychologists are likely to grapple, but it is possible to avoid these questions by adopting a different methodology for researching poltergeists. Both the sorcery and the RSPK theory derive from the researcher's adherence to a methodology which sets as its goal the explanation of the poltergeist. Both theories attempt to answer the question, what causes the poltergeist? In other words, they ask, how do we explain the poltergeist?

A more relativistic and anthropological perspective would substitute the question of "Can we explain the poltergeist?" with "How do we interpret the poltergeist?" In other words, what does the poltergeist mean to the people whom it afflicts? In what ways is it serving as an "idiom of distress" (Crapanzano, 1977) for the articulation of conflicts, needs, dilemmas, and both personal and cultural meaning? From this point of view, both the RSPK and the sorcery interpretation become not endpoints but starting points; they become pathways to the discovery of the meaning of the poltergeist to the afflicted. If parapsychologists who research poltergeists wish to avoid the series of difficult methodological questions which a comparative perspective raises, they might do well to heed Clifford Geertz's famous dictum for anthropology, that the analysis of the poltergeist should be "not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning" (1973: 5).

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Approved For Release 2003/09/10 : CIA-RDP96-00792R000700350006-1
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